COLUMN

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Getting Degrees, Diplomas, or Just Learning Stuff Online

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When I was in school, I couldn't wait to get out of there and into the real world. Now that I've been here for a while, the idea of going back to school has its attractions. But if I do take the plunge, you won't see me schlepping my stuff to a crowded dorm somewhere (my wife wouldn't appreciate it). Instead, I'll take a class online.

This month's mission is to discover resources for online course work. The Internet in particular hosts a cornucopia of "distance-education" resources. You can dabble with a single class in art or astrophysics, get your high school diploma, or even work toward a master's degree from the safety and comfort of your keyboard.

ON THE NET

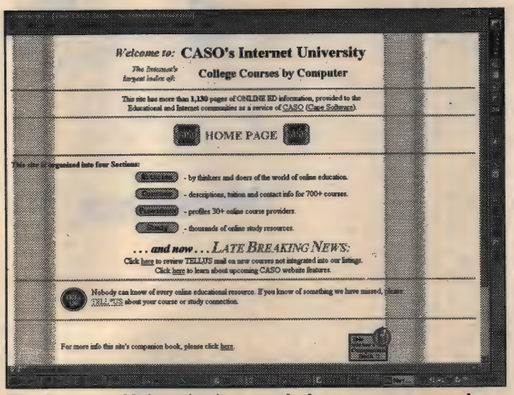
For specific examples of the kinds of courses available online, make your first stop the Internet University (IU) at *www.caso.com*. The companion to a fine book (also called *The Internet University*, published by Cape Software Press), the site offers complete descriptions of more than 700 online courses at 30 colleges and universities. The breadth of available topics is impressive: When I visited, IU listed 50 business, 24 history, 39 science, and 29 sociology courses, just for starters.

Other categories of educational opportunities indexed at this well-organized site include aviation, computers, government, management, and psychology. Although, as a friend noted, "the graphics and layout look sort of like the world does when you drag yourself out of bed for an 8 a.m. course," IU will certainly whet your appetite for the possibilities of online learning.

Next, you might want to pick a school that strikes your fancy and check out its Web site to learn about its online offerings. Not every college offers distance learning, and not every one that does offers online courses—many rely instead on videotapes and other media. But a number of schools firmly embrace education via the Internet, letting you interact with professors via e-mail and chat online with fellow students.

The Comprehensive Distance Education List of Resources *(talon.extramural.uiuc.edu/ramage/welcome.html)* will get you started. Check out its program-link page for an index to many schools offering everything from K-12 classes to advanced degrees.

Centra's Distance Education Index *(www.centra.com/distance/index.html)* is a great springboard for folks interested in getting a degree online. It offers informative original articles and links to distance-education sites. Its academic-institution page lists two dozen colleges and universities that offer classes or degrees to Web users, and its organization index tallies government and nonprofit organizations that focus on the development of distance learning.



The Internet University is a good place to start pursuing an education online. It provides an extensive listing of offerings across myriad disciplines, complete with course descriptions to help you choose.

The University of Houston Clear Lake offers a short but informative FAQ about distance education at *129.7.160.115/course/distedfaq/disted_faq.html*. This document outlines the differences between Web-based training, correspondence courses, interactive television, and other tools and mediums used for distance learning.

Whether you end up taking classes online or offline, you'll want to visit the U.S. Department

The Hot Spot

AudioNet brings real content to RealAudio.

Just as a TV set is useless without some channels to tune to, streaming audio is no fun without something interesting to hear. Enter AudioNet (*www.audionet.com*), a Web site that provides lots of content for use with RealAudio, Progressive Networks' popular streaming-audio player. AudioNet serves as a clearinghouse for RealAudio programming, offering sports, music, and live events. The site, sounds, and downloadable RealAudio player are free.

If you're bored with your local radio stations, note that AudioNet provides a searchable list of stations note that on the Web, letting you listen to talk radio from New York, urban adult contemporary tunes from Dallas, or an all-sports channel from San Francisco. The list includes a total of 150 radio and TV stations.

If Disc Jockey banter grates on your nerves, try AudioNet's online CD jukebox, which offers more than 1,000 full-length albums, selectable by format, artist, or publisher. Of course, if you like what you hear, the record companies would like you to buy the music, so you'll find links for online ordering of the available CDs—after all, you can't listen to RealAudio in the car.

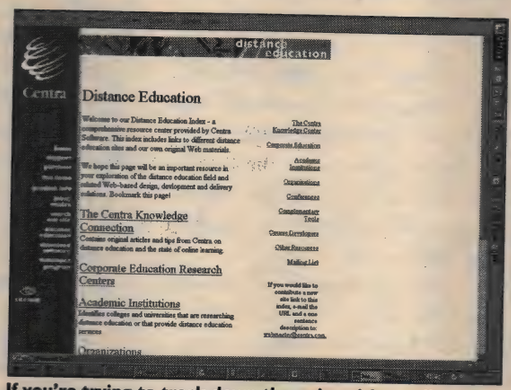
AudioNet also has some tricks that your old transistor radio could never match. A subsidiary site, Policescanner.com, lets you eavesdrop on real-time law-enforcement communications such as a police radio in Los Angeles, a fire-department scanner in Dallas, or air-traffic control at the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. The site even provides charts for decoding dispatchers' numerical codes.

If you can't find a radio station that's playing your song, AudioNet offers you an entire jukebox of album selections.

A well-organized and thoroughly entertaining site, AudioNet offers a mix of live and on-demand programming that will captivate just about anyone with ears. **—K.S.**

of Education's Web site at *www.ed.gov*. Its guide to financial aid *(www.ed.gov/prog_info/SFA/StudentGuide)* is invaluable.

If you unplug your PC speakers first (that plinky-plunky MIDI music should be banned from the Web!), you'll enjoy diving into the Adult Distance Education Internet Surf Shack. The site offers an impressive index of virtual universities, online degree programs, and stand-alone courses. Think a Hungarian language course coupled with an advanced C++ programming class will make you a well-rounded person? The Surf Shack's to be found at *www.helix.net/~jmtaylor/edsurf.html*.



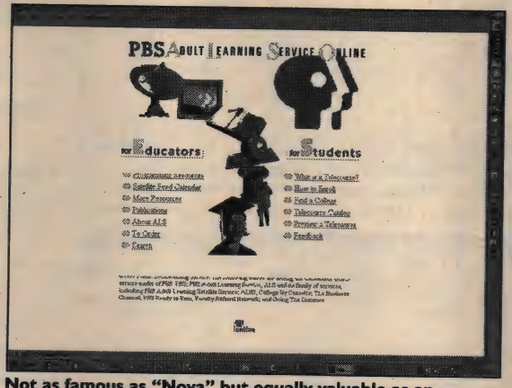
If you're trying to track down the universities, colleges, and other institutions that offer online learning programs, the comprehensive Distance Education List of Resources will prove to be a gold mine.

If you never acquired a high school diploma, Mindquest *(www.mindquest.bloomington.k12.mn.us)* will let you get your diploma online, as will Virtual High School *(www.virtualhighschool.com)*. High school without the tribulations of carrying hall passes, dodging bullies, and finding a prom date—a dream come true. Still more online high schools are listed at *ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jmtaylor/virtualh.htm*.

Whichever high school or college site attracts your interest, be sure to do some research before you enroll and send a hefty tuition check to the institution's registrar. Just about anyone can continue a curriculum, e-mail pop quizzes, and send out construction-paper diplomas, so be sure the school with which you're dealing is an accredited institution.

If you want to learn something new, but are not interested in getting a diploma, you'll find a wide variety of individual courses and certificate programs available on the Net. For instance, if that pesky new PC application suite has you boggled, take a gander at LearnItOnline *(www.learnitonline.com)*, a site devoted to computer software training. Owned and operated by *Shopper*'s parent company Ziff-Davis, this newest ZDNet service offers several courses on popular programs ranging from Microsoft Office 97 and Internet Explorer to Lotus Notes and Netscape Navigator. Courses, offered at levels ranging from beginner to advanced, are available separately for a subscription fee.

CalCampus *(www.calcampus.com)* offers courses and certificate programs, packaged individually and each lasting eight to 12 weeks.



Not as famous as "Nova" but equally valuable as an educational resource, PBS' Adult Learning Service Online offers information about remote learning courses designed in conjunction with hundreds of the nation's colleges.

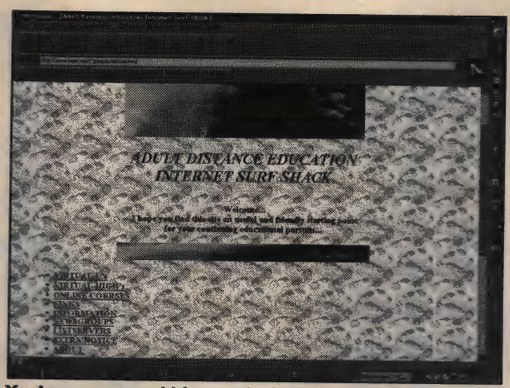
Study areas include English, mathematics, science, social studies, computer programming and technology, foreign languages, general studies, and business. If you have an itch to know more about subjects like religions of the world, business management, or the history of jazz music, this may be your ticket.

PBS (yes, the same folks who bring us "Sesame Street" and "Frontline") offers adult learning online at *www.pbs.org/learn/als*. Its "telecourses," created in cooperation with hundreds of colleges nationwide, let you earn credits by learning from television programs.

Most online classes will cost you some money—after all, it's a lot of work to teach a class, even over the net. Advanced Training Professionals *(www.trainingpros.com)* may be unique in that it offers a free online training service. Courses are divided into four basic areas: business and professional, Internet, software courses, and educator professional development.

Before enrolling in any online course work and sending a check to the registrar, make sure the school you're dealing with is an accredited institution.

With about 20 courses available, Advanced Training Professionals may not have a huge catalog of choices, but what it does offer may interest you, whether it's Developing a Business Plan, Using Microsoft FrontPage, or Putting Your Business on the World Wide Web. You can even receive continuing education units when you're through. The classes are free, but if you want to receive continuing education units, there is a fee of $5 per course.



You're never too old for continuing education. The Adult Distance Education Internet Surf Shack is home to an extensive list of virtual universities, online degree programs, and stand-alone courses to help you broaden your horizons.

AMERICA ONLINE

AOL offers all sorts of online classes at keyword *Online Campus*. Most courses (such as Introduction to Discrete Mathematics, The Theory of Relativity, and Parenting Your Aging Parents) are available for a fee. A few free courses are also available (including Home Fishfarming for Profit and Organic Gardening Pest Clinic). You'll find a variety of courses, from Internet 101 to Special Techniques in Cardiopulmonary Bypass. Each lasts from four to 12 weeks.

Computer mavens who want to brush up on their programming skills whithout cracking a book should visit keyword *Programmer University*. At keyword *Netnoir*, you'll find a range of free classes on Afrocentric topics such as African History 101, The Legend of Malcolm X, and Humor and Satire in African-American Literature.

PRODIGY

Prodigy offers a trove of good stuff related to online education. The place to start is the Distance Learning Guidebook (Jumpword: *DISTANCE LEARNING IG*), which offers links to hundreds of university Web sites, information about online schools, and more.

College is expensive, even when you're taking classes from home, so if you're too old to make your parents pay, be sure to read the Financial Aid FAQ that's here, too. Finally, for talk about all aspects of education, stop by jumpword *EDUCATION BB*. Topics covered here include home schooling, online classes, and adult education. ▼